

**DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

**PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91125**

**TRANSLATING ZUKOFSKY'S CATULLUS**

**Paul Mann**

Translation Review,  
forthcoming 1984



# **HUMANITIES WORKING PAPER 102**

© Paul Mann June 1984

## TRANSLATING ZUKOFSKY'S CATULLUS<sup>1</sup>

Paul Mann

For most translators, the name Zukofsky represents a scandal. It is a name better left unspoken, and when it is spoken it inevitably signifies grotesque infidelity, gratuitous distortion, the deliberate abuse of a poem for the translator's own aesthetic satisfaction. Indeed, Zukofsky is the one name in whose company Robert Lowell is likely to mark a conservative position. Apparently the only readers who respond sympathetically to these translations are devoted readers of Zukofsky's own poetry: a mere handful of scholars and experimental poets, for the most part, since Zukofsky's work is overwhelmingly difficult even for experienced readers of the most hermetic modernist texts.

The case before us is Zukofsky's "translation" (I will not use inverted commas after this, but the sense of this word is precisely what is in question) of the first-century B.C. Roman lyric poet, Gaius Valerius Catullus.<sup>2</sup> No two writers would appear to have less in common than Zukofsky and Catullus. Where Zukofsky is obscure, Catullus is plain-spoken. Where Zukofsky is remote, Catullus is intimate. Where Zukofsky's syntax is tangled and disruptive, Catullus tends to maintain a colloquial surface. While both are poets of enormous erudition and technical skill, Catullus subordinates his virtuosity to the demands of the immediate dramatic presentation; when he flaunts some rhetorical device it is because the situation demands it; he is rarely "literary"

for its own sake. On the surface, it would seem, Zukofsky is about "writing," Catullus about "life." (Further down these distinctions are harder to maintain.) Catullus's poems are like answers to questions just asked, rebuttals to insults, seductions of someone in the room, verse notes scribbled in a language shared with readers who actually people the poems; we merely eavesdrop. The urgency of the best of these poems is evident even when a given word or usage or allusion is obscure, for it seems the genuine obscurity of a fully personal idiom expressing itself in in-jokes, private associations, the day's slang. For Catullus, poetry was apparently a real-life skill, a way to cope with a difficult, fascinating, unpredictable world, and it is this feeling of a life truly lived (whether or not it really was) that gives the poems their sense of permanent immediacy and absolute necessity, and draws so many translators to the poems:

LVIII

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,  
 illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam  
 plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,  
 nunc in quadriuiis et angiportis  
 glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.

Cornish (Loeb): O, Caelius, my Lesbia, that Lesbia, Lesbia whom  
 alone Catullus loved more than himself and all his own,  
 now in the cross-roads and alleys serves the filthy  
 lusts of the descendants of lordly-minded Remus.



## LXXIX

Lesbius est pulcer: quid ni? quem Lesbia malit  
quam te cum tota gente, Catulle, tua.

sed tamen hic pulcer vendat cum gente Catullam,  
si tria notorum savia reppererit.

Cornish: Lesbius is a pretty boy; why not? since Lesbia likes  
him better than you, Catullus, with all your kin. But  
this pretty boy would sell Catullus and all his kin if  
he could find three acquaintances to vouch for him.

Sesar: Lesbius is one of the pretty boys, no wonder Lesbia  
takes him over you and your whole family, Catullus.  
Meanwhile pretty boy would sell off Catullus and family  
for a couple of people who'd just say hello to him.

Whigham: They nickname Lesbia's brother "pulcher",

naturally

since she prefers him to Catullus & the Catulli;  
but let him dispose as he will of Catullus

(& the Catulli)

when he finds three men of distinction

willing to greet him in public.

Zukofsky: Lesbius has pooled her: kidney? whom Lesbia my -- lit  
on -- taking down all your gens, Catullus too ah.  
Say the man pooled her vend that combed gens of Catullus,  
see three notorieties savor or rape a rare hit.

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.

nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

Lovelace: I hate and love; would'st thou the reason know?

I know not; but I burn, and fret it so.

Lamb: I hate and love -- ask why -- I can't explain;

I feel 'tis so, and feel it racking pain.

Moore: I love thee and hate thee, but if I can tell

The cause of my love and hate, may I die!

I can feel it alas! I can feel it too well,

That I love thee and hate thee, but I cannot tell why.

Pound: I hate and love. Why? You may ask but

It beats me. I feel it done to me, and ache.

Whigham: I hate and love. And if you ask me how,

I do not know: I only feel it, and I'm torn in two.

Gregory: I hate and love.

And if you ask me why,

I have no answer, but I discern,

can feel, my senses rooted in eternal torture.

Swanson: I hate while I love; would you ask

how I do it? My pain

proves it's true; that's all there is

to it.

Sesar: I hate her and I love her. Don't ask me why.

It's the way I feel, that's all, and it hurts.

Zukofsky: O th'hate I move love. Quarry it fact I am, for  
that's so re queries.

Nescience, say th'fiery scent I owe whets crookeder.

None of these, it seems to me, is really successful. Catullus's LXXXV, for instance, is extremely concise and grounded in a juxtaposition of emotional turmoil and matter-of-fact tone; Zukofsky's notes on the poem quote Landor's observation on the passage "quare . . . requiris": "flat & prosaic." A good translation would have to animate that flatness with a tone of agonized resignation, with the poet's own realization that in this situation there is nothing he can feel but pain. I think we can eliminate three of these versions from serious consideration simply because they are too long; in a poem of this density, a few words more or less is a major issue. Moore's awful inflation of the original, his swoons and repetitions, obliterate the speed and the curiously anti-romantic tone of the Latin. Swanson's singsong is flat in its own unfortunate way, but probably difficult to pronounce through the clenched teeth of the original. "Discern" in Gergory's version serves no apparent purpose except to rhyme with "eternal" (which isn't in the original either, and "eternal torture" hints at a thoroughly un-Roman sort of afterlife), unless Gregory's point is that Catullus's nescio can be best expressed by the dramatic effect of groping for words ("discern . . . feel"); but this seems wrong too, since Catullus is very precise about his nescio. Of the "shorter" versions, Sesar's might be expendable: Catullus's poem is certainly a complaint, but Sesar reduces it to a petulant whine.



All of these remarks are rather impressionistic ("seems to me") and from this point on become, I'm afraid, even more so. I prefer Pound's version, with reservations. The tautness of the whole is fine; no doubt it was the tautness of the original that chiefly attracted Pound. "It beats me" is probably too jocular, too forced a play on words for this particular poem, but it is the sort of game Catullus often plays and it manages something none of the other versions does: the suggestion that Catullus's pain comes not only from odi et amo but from nescio as well. Whigham is poorly represented in this instance, since his translation of the complete poems is frequently a remarkable achievement of post-Poundian translation. In this case, the presence of an actual version by Pound seems to have cramped Whigham's style; at best he sounds like Pound, at worst like he is trying too hard not to. In the two earlier versions, Lovelace's "burn" is, evidently, intended as a punning mistranslation of fieri (become), but quite Catullan in its way, if nonetheless out of place in a poem which seeks no emotional release through wordplay; "fret" on the other hand is much too fussy. The flat, telegraphic statements of Lamb's first line might be the most satisfying of all, and "racking" is an interesting answer to excrucior (surely better than "fret"), but I dislike the repetition of "feel" in so compact a text, and the syntax gets a bit muddy at the end.

Another reader, more or less familiar with the Latin, with different training and different tastes, would sift and sort this list differently and arrive at a different evaluation -- finding, perhaps, that Pound's "beats me" is not acceptable but Sesar's tone is. I

imagine most readers would tend to narrow the list down to four or five versions, none of them more than fractionally adequate, parts of all of them suggesting a sort of hybrid translation which would itself still be a long way from ideal. This is, in part, my point: despite their clear differences, most of these eight versions hang rather closely together; we can imagine a mix-and-match translation because the approaches are so much alike. What is most striking about the list is that it really contains only two kinds of translation: Zukofsky's and all the rest.

It will be argued by some that this difference simply constitutes a consensus against Zukofsky and grounds for his dismissal. But it is also possible that Zukofsky's radical departure from the tacit methodological boundaries of normal translation practice serves to demonstrate just how restricted those boundaries are. This is especially interesting today, when writers like Steiner and Schulte are proposing translation as a model for hermeneutic activity even as the methodological field of interpretation is becoming increasingly pluralized and contentious. In any event, even before we begin to analyze Zukofsky's translations we discover one of their primary values: they can play a reflexive role as a "limit-case" for translation. Marginal artistic or discursive projects often reveal a great deal, by contrast, about the truth of more conventional practices, which can be very useful whether or not one has any particular inclination toward the margin. This has always been one of the historical functions of the avant-garde: to test by dialectical

divergence, to challenge engrained presuppositions. Zukofsky accomplishes this for translation by being outrageous, which is precisely to say that outrageousness can be invaluable if it is perceived openly and critically. It is not to say that Zukofsky is merely outrageous.

Zukofsky's first function is thus to indicate a potential for experiment in a field which -- relative to the twentieth-century's other arts -- has registered an extremely low tolerance for experimentation. There are, of course, highly-developed rationales for conservatism in translation, all of them anchored in the idea of fidelity. The attack on classical mimesis is a crucial element of modernist painting, but representation necessarily plays a different part in translation: an abstract-expressionist translation is probably unthinkable. But we need not go this far -- nor, indeed, does Zukofsky: he doesn't reject representation, he refocuses it. He is not an exemplar of unbridled freedom. His work tests the definition rather than the principle of fidelity: he experiments with fidelity, attempts to redefine or expand its field. But in order to understand his project, a few critical obstacles must be removed.

In the first place, Zukofsky's importance is not limited to his specific techniques. His method does not exhaust the experimental field any more than rejecting him closes off the potential for experiment. His approach is only one instance of the possibility for pluralizing the sense of translation -- which would also be to expand the hermeneutic field of the original, and of intercultural relations

in general. In the second place, Zukofsky is not out to destroy other approaches; nowhere does he even hint at replacing conventional translations with his own. His work addresses other versions but in a rather congenial and non-combative way (I will return to this point later); the ideological erasers all come from his critics. In the third place, entirely too much effort has been expended attacking (and defending) Zukofsky on ground he never occupied. His detractors often act as if he didn't know that these are not "accurate" translations -- an absurd accusation. In translating all one-hundred and sixteen poems and five fragments -- the entire canon -- at least a few of our objections probably already occurred to him, and we should not waste time dwelling on obvious "meanings" Zukofsky obviously ignores. Obviously he had something else in mind.

My main purpose here is simply to suggest that Zukofsky's Catullus project is worth more serious consideration than one's initial revulsion would recommend. But I would also like to sketch a few condensed and at times contradictory lines of approach to these strange texts. None of the following points is either conclusive or exhaustive; any of them could focus a greatly extended study, and the list as a whole is far from complete. Nor do I wish to speculate about Zukofsky's "intentions," which he kept mostly to himself, and which in any event cannot circumscribe the work. Our primary concern should be with the position or situation of this work in the theoretical field of translation.

1. Zukofsky seems at first to be making merely phonetic or acoustic translations, gratuitously and mechanically transposing Latin sounds into English. Even if this were all he was doing, these would be interesting translations, for they would point up some of the ways other translators automatically dispose of Latin sound -- in the case of a Moore, by drowning it in metrical sludge; in most other cases, by flattening it with Yankee diction. Zukofsky, on the other hand, straddles the aural fence, tries to keep one foot in Latin and one in English, and plays with some of the "poetry that gets lost in translation," to borrow Frost's phrase for a context that would doubtless have horrified him.

A gimmick like "knee-high pots" for nepotes (descendants) can be funny for a lyric or two, but over the long stretch of a whole book the joke begins to look pathological. And Zukofsky's microscopic preface teases us with the possibility that nothing more is involved:

This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his Latin -- tries, as is said, to breathe the "literal" meaning with him.

Aside from an equally abbreviated textual note, that's the entire preface, all the excuse he gives, as if nothing more were required. The trick here is just how literally to take the word literal: isn't Zukofsky's translation in every case the least literal? Beneath the comical echolalia, it would seem, there is a serious question about literalness, some radical departure from the scholar's sense of lexically-grounded paraphrase (nepotes = descendants, period).

There is little doubt that the vast majority of American translators privilege this sense. If our ideal is to incorporate at all points both the "denotative" and "connotative" senses of the text, it is also true that the denotative comes first and, in a pinch (there is always a pinch), we will probably let some tone or allusion go rather than sacrifice "literal" meaning. (The best translators, of course, sacrifice least.) There are a great many reasons for this scale of values: it has to do, for instance, with our culture's extreme emphasis on communication -- on writing as instrumental, a vehicle for transporting detachable and repeatable meanings -- which itself has to do with the socio-historical development of a discursive economy in which meaning, like any other currency, must be exchanged to be truly useful. It has to do with the demystification of "presence" in favor of representation (or, these days, absence), and it has to do with the general tinning of the American ear. It has to do most of all with the assumption that language is itself first and foremost a translation of reality. The point here is that -- whatever particular demands Catullus makes on the translator -- there is no absolute reason to privilege the "sense" of the Loeb version or the Pound version over that which Zukofsky highlights.

For Zukofsky, literal means in the letter. The poet Ron Silliman recognizes this when he notes that Zukofsky "gives primacy to the signifier" rather than the signified, to the act of predication rather than its lexical object.<sup>3</sup> Zukofsky's approach, in other words, is likely to appeal to the postmodern sense of signification, to minds

sensitive to the increasingly troubled relations between language and meaning. But Zukofsky's work also reaches back to very old poetic modes, shamanic or even talmudic attitudes toward language (these interests are confirmed in A); language here does not merely point toward reality but constitutes it in the very graphic and aural formations of its letters and words. Zukofsky's translation is therefore not just new and experimental but anachronistic, even a bit superstitious: it comes from a poetic perspective where one cannot tamper with a thing's name without affecting the thing itself; or where repeating the syllables of that name -- "breathe the 'literal' with him" -- brings the spirit back from the dead. The spirit is literally in the letter. This is translation-by-seance and, as in a seance, the form that reappears is frightening, mangled, ghostly, no longer quite alive.

That this seems so bizarre to us is partly a sign of just how divorced sound and sense are in our culture; it is part of the same phenomenon that produces the curious mismatchings of sound and sense in so many poems, and in the vast majority of translations -- especially those that try to remain "faithful" to sound, as well as sense, by fetishizing prosody. Zukofsky's approach is hardly a panacea but I imagine that if more translators experimented diligently with such techniques along the way, at least, their sensitivity to the originals could only benefit. Auden, I believe, once remarked that a person who thought he had "something to say" in poetry probably wouldn't turn out to be much of a poet; if, on the other hand, he began with a

fascination with the sounds, textures, resonances of words, there was some long-term hope for his work. Zukofsky explores this dimension in translation, the complex collisions and fractures of sound and sense across linguistic and historical barriers, but his aural transpositions are anything but arbitrary: they are one of the purest instances one can find in translation of poetry's ancient inclination toward an almost mystical faith in the power of utterance as such, not to "mean" but to "be." (Pound called Zukofsky an "objectivist" poet not in order to distinguish him from "subjective" modes, but to indicate that his poems were made things, solid entities, autonomous objects.) That the products of this faith in Zukofsky's book are rather bizarre does not prevent them from being exemplary -- indeed, in a way, it can make them all the more endearing. That this faith is explored with great humor saves it from being mere mystification.

But in fact Zukofsky is not just transposing sound. He plays very hard with aural equivalence, but the critic David Gordon has argued persuasively that if Zukofsky had wished to make strictly aural analogues, he had it within his particular powers to get a great deal closer than he did.<sup>4</sup> So perhaps something else is also involved.

2. Obviously Zukofsky has no intention of approximating the sort of canny vernacular Catullus employs, nor even of working in an English spoken anywhere on earth, but the language of these translations is by no means gibberish -- or, rather, not only gibberish -- and the surface strangeness is often easily penetrable. There are a striking number of



instances where minimal interpretive ingenuity will yield emotional registers and thematic concerns quite close to the originals, and frequently closer than more conventional versions. Zukofsky's "equivalences" are achieved, of course, at the expense of "literal" sense and syntactical continuity, and with no real consistency (rather like flashes of light in the darkness), but this inconsistency too serves a hermeneutic purpose: one gets the sense of familiar emotion conveyed in an alien idiom -- which is, after all, the truth of Catullus's relation to us. Perhaps I am overreading here, finding in Zukofsky those resonances I want to find, but it is also possible that one's initial reaction to Zukofsky's weird diction can distract one from perceiving ways in which these translations might be just as faithful, in their own terms, as versions with less troubled and troubling surfaces. Which is also, of course, to raise questions about the function of diction.

In LVIII, the opening lines repeat Lesbia's name three times. The effect is that of a protracted sigh, and even the most slavish translation cannot help but repeat that obsessive, emotionally-charged lingering over her name. But any educated (that is, actual) Roman reader would probably also have recognized this triad as a stock rhetorical figure of solemn, elevated address or apostrophe. None of the conventional translations captures the high formality of this figure, nor the stark contrast with the gutter diction into which it precipitously drops. The word glubit is especially obscene: it indicates the peeling of tree-bark, and suggests that Lesbia is, at the

very least, masturbating the sons of Remus. The adjacent word, magnanimi, is rooted in epic vocabulary; it doesn't really mean "big-hearted" or even "well-born" so much as it evokes the heroic character of Achilles, Hector and other epic warriors. It is, in a way, a word from the same rhetorical zone as the poem's opening figure, and linked with glubit creates an intense juxtaposition, a collision of high and low which -- like the odi et amo of LXXXV -- expresses the poet's extreme emotional tension. Moreover, the poem is deeply concerned with questions of family, name, honor. Catullus's torment stems in part from knowing how willing he is to sacrifice everything, even suos amavit omnes for this woman; erotic compulsion is tested here, as it is in several other poems, against the ideological importance of the Roman family bond -- "his own" rather than "all he owns." The resonance here is with magnanimi Remi nepotes: Lesbia disgraces everyone's name. The great are brought low by their base desires, and the rhetoric itself charts their course.

Of the five versions cited above, Zukofsky's alone seems to me to follow the same poetic curve; the others merely report on it. The Loeb's "my Lesbia, that Lesbia, Lesbia"; Sesar's "our Lesbia, that Lesbia, / the Lesbia" and so on, translate the words and perhaps (in Merwin at least) touch on the sadness the name evokes, but none of the high tone survives. Zukofsky captures it by abandoning the dictionary: "Lesbia new star, Lesbia a light, / all light": nostra is in no sense "new star" nor is illa "all light," but in these words Zukofsky creates a rhetorical equivalent of the original elevated figure where none

exists in English. In the same manner, no Latin lexicon will deliver "o name loss" for unam plus, but name-loss is certainly one of the poem's concerns. Finally, "slunk in doorways, the dingy parts / glut magnanimous," juxtaposed with "new star . . . all light," follows exactly the course from the houses of the high-born to the sewer, from the mellifluous and solemn to the guttural and obscene, that characterizes the original's descent from illa Lesbia to glubit.

Instances of this sort abound, though I doubt that this one will persuade the truly skeptical. My point is not to deny that the translation is a travesty, but to appreciate what sort of travesty it is, and to comprehend that its excesses at times provide fidelities other versions miss. Coherence without surface tension is difficult to accept, especially in connection with a poet whose surfaces are as secure as Catullus's. But by relinquishing the surface of Catullan diction -- which every other translator claims as the poems' chief quality -- Zukofsky releases varieties of meaning lost in every other version. To be sure, one does have to reach a bit to recover these meanings, but really not much further than one does in the Latin poem itself, and by much the same interpretive means. And why not produce translations where the reader has to reach a little for understanding?

3. One of the perverse pleasures of Zukofsky's approach is the absolutely brazen way it embraces that great taboo of translation, the false cognate. "Fiery" for fieri is in fact a rather mild instance in a vast repertoire of bent echoes; "kidney" for quid ni points toward a

madder extreme. Indeed, the false cognate is the rule here, the central mechanism. There is no denying that this approach is a travesty in the strictest sense of the word, nor that the jokes tend to be at Catullus's expense. But what if Zukofsky's slapstick pursuit of faux amis also bespeaks a deeper and quite serious (and totally mad?) faith that at some level Latin and English really are fully cognative, and that by trying to write in the twilight zone between them he might invoke not only Catullus but the bridge that links his world to our own? What if Zukofsky were the only translator to have taken Walter Benjamin literally when he dreamed of a kind of "interlinear" translation, of a work that did not anglicize Latin but latinized English, of a translation that constituted itself completely as a "somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages"?<sup>5</sup> What if, in relation to Steiner's ideal, Zukofsky's metapoetical translations were our one pure instance of translation transcending the condition of Babel?

4. So much for idealist readings. On the other side, Zukofsky's translations are not unfaithful just to Catullus but to his entire culture, and thereby represent a darker current of intercultural betrayals that flows through all translation practice. Zukofsky's exploitation of classical poetic practice for the sake of his postmodernist aesthetic illuminates, by extreme exaggeration, a much more pervasive exercise of cultural power. The political ramifications of this sort of practice are quite disturbing: try to imagine a yanqui

translator doing the same sort of thing to a Latin American political poet like Roque Dalton or Otto René Castillo. It would be easy enough, in this respect, to dismiss Zukofsky as unrepresentative, but it is possible that he marks a point on an ethical continuum which all translators must occupy, whatever their personal standards and goals. There is a spooky sense in which Zukofsky brings to light a hidden agenda of all translation: the fear of the alien and the impulse to turn it into oneself, one's own.

Today translation is often promoted (by Steiner, for instance) as a sort of super-humanist model for intercultural relations -- a form of empathy or hospitality, a way to increase communication in a tense world, and so on -- and as a result translators are now able to argue that their work places them not on the fringes but in the forefront of humanist activity. Translation Review is one of the leading voices for this position and therefore perhaps the proper place to interrogate it. One must ask, for instance, whether in the "real" world there is any such thing as innocent cultural practice. Certainly this question must concern all American translators, especially but by no means exclusively those who translate from the literature of the so-called "developing" nations. Exactly where in our monstrous cultural economy of absorption and exploitation does translation fit? Even W. S. Merwin, a translator of special intelligence and sympathy, has wondered in print whether all translation necessarily carries some taint of imperialism.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the translator's individual scruples, power (in the Foucauldian sense) operates discourse and situates the writer

or translator within a discursive economy which s/he by no means controls but which is adjacent, at nearly every point, to the general circulation of power. Perhaps to write is the primary act of complicity and as such cannot be transcended in writing. Terry Eagleton insists that language itself, "that most innocent and spontaneous of common currencies, is in reality a terrain scarred, fissured and divided by the cataclysms of political history, strewn with the relics of imperialist, nationalist, regionalist and class combat."<sup>7</sup> So much more so for translation. In Zukofsky's Catullus this grim possibility, this trap, is not hidden, reified, idealized or even resisted but rendered explicit as such, one of the work's primary themes and therefore an object of direct consideration. It is another instance where Zukofsky's crimes are more useful than the obediences of most other translators.

5. I often show these versions to students in translation workshops, and I've found that most students will finally offer a grudging hospitality to Zukofsky only as he is presented here -- as one entry in an array of more "accurate" translations, some of which (Pound's, Whigham's) the students believe capable of standing on their own. It is quite possible that this is the way Zukofsky himself conceived of his work: I got several of the versions of LXXXV from a page of Zukofsky's own notes, reproduced on the book's cover.

But if Zukofsky can be said to add to this field of translations, then what is missing without him? Is he calling into question the very

notion of an independent translation -- one translation for one original? Is any translation just as hermeneutically dependent on other translations as it is on the original? Is it, indeed, dependent not only on translations of the same text but on all translations of all other texts as well -- dependent, for instance, on the reader's phenomenological immersion in a culture of translation? Does Zukofsky deconstruct the notion of the self-sufficient translation by exaggerating the intertextuality of all translation? Is there implicit in Zukofsky a kind of unified field theory of translation?

6. In another context, Keith Cohen describes the délire of translation, a neologism indicating not only "delirium" but also de-lire, de-reading<sup>8</sup> -- but a madness or unreading that is discernible even in the most conventional literary works, as poststructuralism is so good at exposing. In Zukofsky's case we are faced with the insane but dialectically quite reasonable prospect of de-translation, a purposefully adversary rather than advocative translation, translation through the looking glass. It is as though Zukofsky had once more embraced the most literal reading: traduttore traditore: if the translator is by definition a traitor (and isn't the link between these words itself falsely cognitive, somewhat in Zukofsky's own manner?), then there must be a crucial sense in which betrayal makes the truest translation.

7. "Fidelity" and "betrayal" are not only words from religious and legal lexicons; they are also, of course, part of the language of what our bewildered age calls "relationships." In the field of translations there are casual affairs and brief encounters; a few brilliantly promiscuous operators (Pound and Merwin sleep around prolifically); shotgun weddings and marriages of convenience (mostly arranged by publishers and doubtless, in the future, with the aid of computer matching); platonic affairs (Shelley's Symposium?); unconsummated marriages and grotesque mismatches (Bellitt's Lorca on both counts); varieties of kinkiness (our case in point); and, on rare occasions, marriages of true minds (Rabassa with García Marquez, Merwin with the Chanson de Roland). Some translators are indifferent spouses and some as fiercely possessive as the most insanely jealous lover and some are content to stand in a crowd of suitors (as most translators must do with Neruda, for instance). It would be quite easy to push this analogy too far, but it is useful to emphasize that fidelity and betrayal in translation must be matters of passionate affinity and not merely of law; that the law is often used to justify and maintain the most passionless, bloodless, oppressive affairs; that some unions can only be achieved by transgressing what is imposed from without as law; and that, as in the most intense relationships, fidelity and betrayal can be simultaneous.

It is not my wish to use Zukofsky to advocate a total "sexual revolution" in translation, any more than it is to endorse the enormous parody of liberation that has been acted out in western cultures in



recent decades; nonetheless, it seems obvious that translation practice in general could stand some unbuckling, arousal, play. The analogy might also point up ways in which the dominant ideology of translation, best represented in the notion of polite fidelity, is itself based on a rather perverse and repressive psychology of dominance and submission (or submission as dominance). Would we consider a relationship in which one partner always poses as modest, subservient and self-effacing a healthy one? Aren't relations who claim to have completely sacrificed themselves for our benefit often the most covertly manipulative, engaged in complex strategies of emotional extortion? The conventional rhetoric of translation evokes nothing so much as the curtained victorian parlor and the sadean dungeon (linked, we have learned, by a very short corridor); it is the language of masochistic fantasies, in which the passive partner writes all the rules. Indeed, seen in this light, what is most disturbing about Zukofsky's per-versions is not just that they are strange but that they resonate so loudly with transgressive levels of the most "normal" translation, and perhaps this helps explain the vehemence of the backlash against him: perhaps his detractors want translation back in the closet.

Several poststructuralists argue that all sexuality desires in some respect to transgress the law, and the law must try to suppress these transgressions or reinscribe them within its code. In Zukofsky's Catullus, the struggle between textual desire and textual law is played out for once in the open. And it is in this connection that we can also, finally, confront the question: Why Catullus? Why choose a poet

with so stable a rhetorical surface? Wouldn't a poet like Mallarmé have been more suitable? One possible answer is that Catullus is himself an explicitly erotic poet and here he gets fucked by Zukofsky. If Catullus feels betrayed by his Lesbia he is also betrayed by Zukofsky for the sake of a special textual pleasure -- the two betrayals run closely parallel and suggest the theoretical potential for an erotology of translation, a psychoanalysis along the most general and radical lines.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. Catullus (Gai Valeri Catulli Veronensis Liber), translated by Celia and Louis Zukofsky (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1969). My practice in this essay is to incorporate the work under Louis Zukofsky's name -- a practice which follows that of most other commentators and is, without question, sexist. My reason for doing so results from my inability to read these translations apart from Louis Zukofsky's own poetry, which casts an immense shadow over the Catullus translations. Zukofsky's other translations -- mostly fragments of the Book of Job and some Greek tragedy -- use similar techniques and are completely incorporated into his own vast epic poem, A (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978).

Other translations consulted in preparing this essay include:

F. W. Cornish, "The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus," in Catullus, Tibullus and Pervigilium Veneris (Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1925)

Horace Gregory, The Poems of Catullus (New York: Covici-Friede, 1931)

W. S. Merwin, Selected Translations: 1948-1968 (New York: Atheneum, 1969)

Carl Sesar, Selected Poems of Catullus (New York: Mason and Lipscomb, 1974)

Roy A. Swanson, Odi et Amo: The Complete Poetry of Catullus (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959)

Peter Whigham, The Poems of Catullus (New York: Penguin, 1966)

2. The reader should know that I am not a classicist, and read little Latin, and therefore come to this subject precisely as a reader of translations. Perhaps this disqualifies me, but I have come to believe that the serious reader of translations is ill-advised to rely too much on the evaluations of "experts." The few forays into the Latin texts I risk were largely developed from conversation with Professor G. W. Pigman, III, who has my gratitude but shares none of the blame.

Professor Pigman also points out that my general remarks on Catullus are only pertinent to the "Lesbia" poems, and that elsewhere (LXIV and LXVIII, for example) Catullus can be immensely "literary." The relation between Zukofsky's postmodernist and Catullus's "Alexandrian" formality is not explored in this essay, although it would certainly be worth pursuing.

3. "Composition as Action," Poetics Journal 3 (May 1983), p. 74.

4. "A Note on LZ's Catullus LXI: Theme and Variations," Sagetrieb 2.2 (Summer-Fall 1983), pp. 113-21.

5. "The Task of the Translator," in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 69-82.

6. Merwin: "Every approach to the indigenous literature of the Americas, and in particular to those works whose forms and main or entire impulse antedate the European conquest, is troubling, and this is so in close proportion to the degree to which the reconstruction

evokes the life and excitement of the original. The fact that the reconstructions are indispensable to us common readers -- that our knowledge of these words out of the past of the Americas in which we were born and learned to speak depends (entirely, in most cases) on their representations in languages brought from Europe by the same conquest that overran the American natives -- is and should be a part of what troubles us, as it is part of the uneasy elusive richness of our cultural lives, and of the bad conscience and sense of inherited deprivation which these works stir in us."

Review of The Book of Counsel: The Popul Vuh of the Quiche Maya of Guatemala, trans. Munro S. Edmonson; in The New York Review of Books XVIII.7 (April 20, 1972), p. 16.

7. Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory

(London: Verso Editions, 1976), p. 54.

8. "The Délire of Translation," sub-stance 16 (1977), pp. 85-88.

9. Postscript: The reader will be pleased to learn of the following, from the Los Angeles Times book review section (May 27, 1984):

Men in Aida: Book One by David Melnick (Tuumba Press, 2639 Russell St., Berkeley 94705: \$3, paperback) is a wonderful "translation" -- sound for sound -- of the first book of Homer's "Iliad." Melnick uses English to mimic the original Greek: "All a gay day Tina man tin a ray, oh men he hear ya," and the story begins to emerge. One basic activity of this new band of Achaians is sex: "Lissome Maya neck & my oh men in par. Am I, gay guy, alloy? . . . Horse fat. Oh peel

a yoni. Dock hose gay in a ten-day 'I ate her.'" But work and wages have their place, too: "Lose some men, us state you got her offer on top a raise. Yah pine? Nah."

Fantastic rhythms and humorous entertainment seldom seen together in poetry. But what's it all about? Melnick forewarns: "Ideas'll kill you."

(Review by Kenneth Funsten)